

Many priests still relish role ** The majority of them have confidence in the Catholic Church. More than half are flexible on teachings because of Vatican II

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Abstract:

The sex abuse scandal is the church's biggest crisis in 100 years, according to seven in 10 priests, yet the priests don't rank it as their greatest challenge. They say their major hurdles are counteracting a secular society, dealing with the shortage of priests and coping with burnout.

*Liberal priests -- who are older and remember the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s -- tend to be more flexible about church teachings. Younger priests are more **conservative** because they see the council as **something from the history books**, not something they experienced as priests, said Sally Vance-Trembath, a **theology** professor **from** the University of **San Francisco** who has studied the promises of **Vatican II**.*

*Archdiocesan spokeswoman Catherine **Rossi** said **officials** did not tell priests "what to do with the survey." She said, "We received a lot of **calls from** priests wondering about the survey, so we sent a memo to priests simply **clarifying** that the survey was not requested nor sanctioned by the bishops or the archdiocese."*

Full Text:

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A nationwide poll of **1,854** active and retired priests in 80 dioceses conducted by The Morning Call and The Los Angeles Times. *** Due to newsroom front-end system production difficulties the entire text could not be electronically + captured for the online archive, please see microfilm for the complete graphics.

The nation's Roman Catholic priests are content with their lives as clerics, despite the ongoing sexual abuse scandal, a shortage of priests and other challenges in the changing American church, according to a poll conducted by The Morning Call and the Los Angeles Times.

Seven of 10 priests expressed great contentment with their vocation and many of the 1,854 priests **surveyed** said they relish helping people, preaching, administering sacraments such as the Eucharist, and celebrating Mass -- the heart of their vocation.

While **86** percent of the priests surveyed say they had a great deal or some confidence in the church, 78 percent think the church should be reformed, chiefly by giving the laity more power or by making the hierarchal church more democratic.

The sex abuse scandal is the church's biggest crisis in 100 years, according to seven in 10 priests, yet the priests don't rank it as their greatest **challenge**. **They** say their major hurdles are counteracting a secular society, dealing with the shortage of priests and coping with burnout.

Some even see good coming from the abuse scandal, priests said in follow-up interviews.

The scandal might trigger healthy change in an evolving church, said one priest who desires reform in church structure.

"I'm very **hopeful** for the future of the church and I think the experience will purify the church," said the Rev. Don Clifford, 73, a Jesuit who directs an interfaith institute at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

The survey sought the opinions of priests in the United States and **Puerto Rico**. The survey had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The Morning Call, in conjunction with the **Muhlenberg** College Institute of Public Opinion, surveyed priests in the Allentown and Scranton dioceses and in the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

Priests are content

Priests today are more satisfied with their lives than they were in 1994, when the Los Angeles Times conducted a similar poll. Today, 70 percent are very satisfied and another 21 percent are somewhat satisfied. Eight years ago, 56 percent of priests were very satisfied and 30 percent were somewhat satisfied.

More than half the priests who describe themselves **as** liberal are very satisfied with their lives, while more than three-quarters of conservative priests are very satisfied.

When priests were asked about their greatest joys, 37 percent mentioned ministry or helping others. For the Rev. Albert Leonard of the Diocese of Scranton, simply listening to people is one of the best parts of his job.

"You can't give people answers, but you can listen and accept them," said Leonard, pastor of Holy Child Church in **Mansfield**.

Thirty-one percent of the nation's priests find contentment giving sacraments such as baptism and confirmation. Another 21 percent mentioned that preaching is their greatest joy.

The findings of the poll echo the conclusions of a **report** issued this year by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a nonprofit organization that studies the Catholic Church. In the **CARA** survey, nearly all priests said they are happy in their ministry and satisfied with their lives **as** priests.

In the newspapers' poll, the vast majority of priests -- 72 percent -- said they would definitely enter the priesthood again and another 18 percent said they would probably enter the priesthood if they had a second chance. Ninety-one percent said it is unlikely they will leave the priesthood in the next few years.

Almost nine out of 10 priests said they'd advise young men to enter the priesthood.

Sixteen percent of liberal priests and 4 percent of conservative priests said they would advise against the priesthood, the poll found. Those who would recommend against the clerical life cite the church's celibacy rule, problems with bishops and the hierarchy of the church, and their belief that the **structure** of the church is dysfunctional.

Clifford, the Jesuit **from** Philadelphia, said he would point a man to the priesthood only because he presumes there will be changes in the way seminarians are screened and trained. New priests, he said, should be prepared for consensus-building and dialogue.

If a man entering the seminary gets traditional training that suggests his word will carry more weight with parishioners simply because he's a priest, "he'll be eaten alive" **after** he's ordained, Clifford said.

Overall, priests in eastern Pennsylvania expressed more conservative religious and political views than priests nationwide. Priests in the region are less likely than their colleagues in other parts of the country to favor the ordination of women, for example. They are more likely than clerics from other regions to say that sex between unmarried people and abortion are always sins.

More flexible on doctrine

Most priests today are flexible about church teachings. More than half of all priests surveyed nationwide -- **58 percent**, with a **slightly** smaller percentage in eastern Pennsylvania -- said lay men and women can disagree with some church teachings and still be f a i t h . Catholics. More than a third, however, disagreed.

Liberal priests -- who are older and remember the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in **the** early 1960s -- tend to be more flexible about church teachings. Younger priests are more conservative because they see the council as something from the history books, not something they experienced as priests, said Sally **Vance-Trembath**, a theology professor from the University of San Francisco who has studied the promises of Vatican II.

Ninety-one percent of priests who described themselves as liberal feel lay Catholics could be faithful if they disagree with some church teachings. Among conservatives, the share dropped to 28 percent.

The poll asked priests whether they consider nine behaviors sins. The vast majority of priests said it is always or often a sin for a woman to have an abortion and for unmarried people to have sexual relations.

Nearly three-quarters said it is always or often a sin to engage in homosexual behavior. And more than three-quarters said it is always or often a sin for a person suffering from a debilitating illness to take his or her own life.

Sixty-three percent say it is always or often a sin to use cloning for medical research, while 74 percent say it is always or often a sin to use stem cells of fetuses for medical research.

About half say it is always or often a sin to use condoms as a protection against AIDS. And about half said masturbation is always or often a sin.

Fifty-three percent believe it is always or often a sin for married couples to use artificial birth control.

Many lay Catholics couldn't disagree more, said Vance-Trembath, who has studied the promises of Vatican II, which brought several reforms to the church.

"Most Catholics do not think they're in a state of mortal sin because they've been taking the pill for the last 20 years," she said.

In the survey, priests also answered questions about their sexual orientation. Sixty-seven percent said they are heterosexual. Eight percent said they lean toward heterosexuality. Fifteen percent said they are gay or lean toward homosexuality and 5 **percent** described their sexual orientation as "completely in the middle."

Other research puts the percentage of gay priests at 35 percent to 50 percent, said researchers who analyzed data **from** the newspapers' poll.

While numbers vary, many studies that looked at the prevalence of homosexuality in the adult population say about 4 percent of American men and 2 percent of American women **identify** themselves as gay.

More than 40 percent of all priests said there is definitely or probably a homosexual subculture in their diocese. Younger priests were more likely to say there are gay subcultures in their dioceses and the seminaries they attended.

The poll asked priests their views on celibacy, giving them four choices. To indicate their practice, about a third of the priests checked the statement "celibacy is not a problem for me and I do not waver in my vows." Nearly half, 47 percent, selected the statement "celibacy takes time to achieve and I consider it an ongoing journey." About 14 percent said they **try** to live a celibate life but do not always succeed. Two percent selected the statement "celibacy is not relevant to my priesthood and I do not observe it."

Priest shortage a big problem

American clerics face overwork and other challenges. One-fourth of the priests surveyed said the nation's

priest shortage, which can lead to long hours and exhaustion, is among the most important problems facing the Catholic Church in America today.

While other **faiths** report clergy shortages, it is felt acutely in the Catholic Church because only ordained priests can celebrate the Eucharist, which also is known as the Mass. The Eucharist is central to Catholics' faith.

Since 1965, the number of American priests has dropped by more than 13,000, slipping from more than 58,000 in 1965 to 44,874 this year, according to data **from** CARA. Two in five active priests polled for the CARA study said they work more than 80 hours a week. Priests questioned for the CARA study said they're more likely to **think** seriously about leaving the priesthood.

While pulpits are emptying, pews are filling.

Between 1965 and this year, the number of American Catholics grew by more than 16 million, rising **from** 45.6 million in 1965 to 62.2 million this year.

In the survey, 15 percent of the nation's priests cited burnout/ excessive demands as their top challenge as a priest.

While priests are working more, their professional stock is **falling**, said Vance-Trembath, the theology professor. Secularism, she said, is partly to blame.

A generation ago, when Catholic families were larger, most Catholic parents wanted a son to enter the priesthood, she said. Today, many **families** actively discourage their sons **from** donning a clerical collar.

As their prestige wanes, priests are under greater demands, said **David Yamane, a sociology professor at the University of Notre Dame** who has written about the challenges **and frustrations priests face**.

Some Catholics are demanding that already-overworked priests spend more time researching and writing homilies, which Protestants call sermons. **Others** want Mass to be entertaining, **Yamane** said.

Meanwhile, the influence of families and tight-knit neighborhoods -- two support systems that once worked **hand** in hand with the church to help people -- is waning, putting even more pressure on priests, **Yamane** said.

Other challenges

The priest shortage isn't the only challenge facing the church that concerns priests.

When asked about their own struggles, a worry was the growing tug of secularism. Twelve percent said their

"We battle it every day," said Leonard, of the **Scranton** Diocese. "I'd like to get people to see how the Lord can work in their everyday lives."

What Catholics need most, said three of five priests, is spiritual guidance and fulfillment. Nineteen percent said the biggest need of the laity is moral guidance.

Fourteen percent of priests said lack of faith or knowledge about faith is the laity's biggest problem, and 12 percent said Catholics' biggest hurdle is resolving the conflict between religious principles and the secular world.

Frustration over media coverage of the church is another major concern. Seventy-three percent of all priests -- including majorities of liberals and conservatives, young and old -- think the media covers the church with a negative slant.

In hundreds of unsolicited comments, eastern Pennsylvania's priests said they are troubled and saddened by the media's often negative reporting of the sexual abuse scandal. Too often, priests said, the media ignore the church's positive contributions, such as feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and performing other acts known as "the works of mercy." There is, they said, much more to the church than scandal.

"There's a lot of abuse out there" in society, said Leonard. "Why is the media just focusing on Catholic priests?"

Priests in eastern Pennsylvania also questioned the motivation behind the survey, and some suggested that it was evidence of bias.

"There is definitely an anti-Catholic bias on all accounts in the media and people are going to react to it in a way the bigots do not want -- by reaffirming their identities as Roman Catholic," one priest wrote.

Too often, Leonard said, journalists don't understand the church's teachings, including the doctrine of mystery, the Catholic belief that some theological mysteries cannot be explained.

Catholic researchers and academics were consulted in the composition of survey questions, said Susan **Pinkus**, director of the poll in Los Angeles.

Media coverage of the church, Leonard said, too often focuses on the mundane when the church, by its very nature, is steeped in mystery and news so powerfully optimistic it is difficult to understand.

"We believe God sent his son into the world to tell us there's something beyond this life," Leonard said. "And that's just mind-boggling."

Some seek reform

While priests love their work and devote their lives to spiritual matters, many also are deeply committed to reforming the church.

More than half the priests nationwide rate the state of the church as good, but a third say "things are not so good." Priests **from** the Northeast, including those in Pennsylvania, were more likely to say the state of the church was not so good or poor than colleagues in the South, West and Midwest.

Among those who say the church needs to be reformed, nearly one-**fifth** want to empower the laity more, a promise of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. The council, also known as Vatican II, increased the role of lay Catholics and changed the formerly all-Latin rite into a Mass spoken in people's native tongues. A **fifth** of the reform-minded priests also want the church, which is managed from the top down, to be more democratic.

Many liberal priests believe that a greater role for laity and other promises of the Second **Vatican** Council were never fully realized, said the University of San Francisco's Vance-Trembath.

While many priests seek change in their church, almost three of four either strongly approve or somewhat approve of the job their bishops are doing. Nearly three-quarters believe their bishop's stance on moral issues is just about right. Liberal priests were more likely to disapprove of the job their bishop is doing or think his views are too conservative.

Throughout the poll, liberal priests were more ambivalent about the church and some of its teachings. They also were more likely to believe the church should reconsider some of its dogma.

One priest complained that bishops and other church leaders should "stay out" of Catholics' bedrooms. Another priest, who is 60, said his diocese's thinking was so backward it is an "ecclesiastical Jurassic Park."

After receiving the survey in late June, dozens of priests called their chanceries and the Catholic League in, New York for guidance. One respondent from the Philadelphia Archdiocese said a vicar there "led priests to believe" they shouldn't fill it out.

"The church always wants control and secrets, not truth," the priest wrote on his survey. There is, he added, "a fear of reality and fear of 'image,' which means more than ministry."

Archdiocesan spokeswoman Catherine Rossi said officials did not tell priests "what to do with the survey." She said, "We received a lot of calls **from** priests wondering about the survey, so we sent a memo to priests simply clarifying that the survey was not requested nor sanctioned by the bishops or the archdiocese."

Should women be priests?

Priests are divided over the notion of ordaining women to the priesthood. Slightly more than half of those polled oppose the ordination of women, while 46 percent favor the idea.

Younger priests disliked the idea more than their older colleagues, and priests in eastern Pennsylvania are less likely than clerics in other parts of the country to approve of women in the pulpit.

Leonard, 42, can't see women priests in the billion-member global church because women in some other parts of the world don't enjoy nearly as many rights as their American counterparts.

"If the Catholic Church was only in America, women's ordination might work," he said.

One priest said the only reason some women are interested in becoming priests is because they want to make a grab for power. "There is no love in the [women's ordination] movement, only a thirst for power," wrote the priest, who is **37**.

Fifty-seven percent of priests favor the idea of ordaining women deacons, ministers of the church who assist the priest, marry couples and administer the sacrament of baptism.

A larger share of priests, 69 percent, support a married clergy. When the Los Angeles Times asked the same question in **1994**, 57 percent of the nation's priests favored married priests.

In contrast, Pope John Paul II has said there is no room for a married priesthood and he opposes ordaining women.

The ideological differences between liberals and conservatives in the church worries Clifford, the Jesuit in the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

"There's an almost silent schism in the church right now, and I think it's the church's greatest problem," he said.

"The two camps aren't talking to each other. My hope is that in the next papacy, the leadership understands that there is a need for dialogue."

Despite his concerns, Clifford isn't abandoning hope.

"I always bet on the [power of] the Holy Spirit," he said. "I feel God has a few surprises up his sleeve."

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